13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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were poor and there were no wheeled vehicles, or where there was no horse for a slide-car, the burden rope was all that was required to carry home the harvest; distances were mercifully small on the tiny farms. Rushes for rope making were cut when fully grown, beetled with a mell and broken by hand to rid them of pith. They were then spread to dry and afterwards tied in bundles ready to be fashioned into ropes when wintry weather brought indoor leisure. Ropes made of cowhair as well as horsehair, sometimes mixed with seasoned sedge (sprit) once found many uses about the farm. Horsehair fishing lines and snares for seabirds are described elsewhere, but we may refer here to snares for small birds which in south Armagh, for example, are laid on the grass in hard wintry weather over a scattering of grain or breadcrumbs. Inside the frame of a pegged string or a bent sally rod are tied a dozen or more snares made of single or double horsehair. By this means blackbirds, thrushes, sparrows, and finches are caught by the feet, nowadays for sport but, no doubt, once as a welcome addition to the food supply. Similar horsehair snares for catching small birds are known from England and, further afield, from the Sudan. Reins of horsehair are said to have been common quite recently in Donegal, and I would hazard a guess that horsehair nets, such as were made in Harris (Martin Martin tells us) for catching seals, were formerly made there.

Mats and baskets of many kinds were fashioned from straw and other materials such as marram grass. This tough grass is harvested in places all around the coast and put to many uses, including thatching. It is cut below the surface of the sandy dunes, and in Donegal I have seen a toothed sickle used for the purpose. The techniques of constructing mats and baskets of these materials are closely related and seem to fall into three classes, sown plaits, built-up plaits and coiled work. Coiled basketry is best represented in the once universal bee-skep, in the seed-baskets of the south, the seats and armchairs of the west, and in the food-carrying baskets of the Aran Islands (Fig. 69). It is an interesting detail of their construction that a bone pin is used to insert the ties, which are usually made of split briar. The conical hens' nests hung on pegs on the kitchen walls (Fig. 16) are also constructed in a coil technique, but

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developed from wicker constructions which, like the stone weirs, were once built by shore dwellers for their own needs. But weirs were not the only structure built in tidal waters. The inquiring visitor will observe along many stretches of coast straight lines of stones running out to sea which are the remains of little piers alongside which small boats could lie. Back of them beyond the reach of the tide there may be the ruins of a boat shelter which might never have been more than a rectangular pen of stone walls or earth banks. Such pens are still used to protect the curraghs of the west coast from the wind which is their worst enemy.[1] The vessels are in addition weighted down with stones (Fig. 75), and to this end the gunwales often project at the rear of the curraghs to give purchase for the boulders (Fig. 78).

On the lonely and now abandoned island of St. Kilda the portion which a woman took to her husband on marriage is said to have been 'a pound of horsehair to make a gin to catch fowls'.[2] Martin Martin in his account of the island also tells us that the 200 inhabitants yearly killed and preserved above 20,000 birds, and in addition prodigious numbers of seabirds' eggs were consumed. The killing of seabirds and the taking of eggs for export to England during the worst period of food shortage in the second world war brought about a temporary revival of old skills on many parts of the Irish coast. Down to times still remembered fowling was a seasonal activity on most of the islands where seabirds assemble to nest. Birds of the auk family were caught in horsehair 'dulls' (snares) pegged to the ground. For other birds such as rock pigeons the snares were baited. July was the busy month, and the birds not eaten in this 'hungry month' were salted down for the winter. On Rathlin Island the cliffs and sea-slopes were apportioned in strips and demarcated by spikes driven into the rocks. It is remembered that single men in search of eggs would let themselves alone down ropes attached to iron pins in the cliff edge. Traditions of other ways of catching the birds have been lost but one may be fairly sure that the various methods described by Martin Martin and more recently by Kenneth Williamson for the

[1] S. Piggott, *Antiquity*, 28 (1954), 19–24.
[2] Martin Martin, *The Western Isles*, 317.

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223 Faeroe Islands[1] were practised in a region which has so many culture parallels with the northern isles.

225 Down to recent times coast-dwellers also took their toll of seals and porpoises. 'We thought more of a seal in those days', wrote Thomas O'Crohan of the Blaskets, 'than of the very best pig.'[2] They were valued too for their skins, which as we have mentioned made covers for the curraghs and shoes for the rock-climbers. Seal hunting was dangerous work, sometimes involving swimming into the underwater caves where they breed. The seal catchers in County Cork wore 'bags quilted with charcoal' on their arms, for the animals let go their hold when they bit on the crunching charcoal.[3] In the Blaskets porpoises were slaughtered after being driven ashore by boats, and then 'everyone was crimson with the blood of the sea-pigs'.[4] The meat was salted down.

226 Crabs and lobsters, like so many other seafoods, are now neglected and even despised, though there are commercial fisheries in areas accessible to markets. Apart from creel fishing they were formerly taken from the rock holes where they lie, either by hand or with an iron hook. In County Kerry one man would hold another under the water with an oar while he searched the holes. The old-style pots or creels are circular, with a flat weighted bottom, sometimes hinged: the principle rods are of hazel or even whin, the woven sides of sally, laurel or heather stems. They vary in pattern from one district to another, as do the round-topped rectangular net-creels which have taken their place almost everywhere (Fig. 76). The lobstermen are a hardy breed, many of them having turned from long-line fishing, and they have kept up the feuds and rivalries to which the long-liners were addicted. In both types of fishing the search for bait is an exacting occupation. I illustrate a special fork used for digging lug worms, and also a mussel rake (Fig. 74).

222 674 If it is difficult to obtain information about the history of such tools and activities as these, which have been the concern

[1] K. Williamson, *The Atlantic Islands*, ch. 6. [Text continues on p. 232]
[2] T. O'Crohan, *The Islandman*, 99.
[3] E. Wakefield, *An Account of Ireland*, 2, 127.
[4] T. O'Crohan, op. cit., 12.